The Practice of Intersubjectivity in Li-Young Lee's Poetry

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Donna undresses, her stomach is white.
In the yard, dewy and shivering
with crickets, we lie naked,
face-up, face-down.
(Lee, "Persimmons," *Rose* 17)

In "Persimmons," Li-Young Lee represents sexual intercourse with his wife Donna without any hierarchical connotations in their relationship: "we lie naked, / face-up, face-down" (my emphasis). Instead of describing "I lay and undress her," that is, instead of seeing his wife as the object of his sexual desire, Lee chooses the word "we" which denotes solidarity based on equality. The line "we lie naked" indicates that they are equal participants in the act of making love. The following significant expression "face-up, face-down" shows that they do not care which is on top of the other; as playmates enjoy changing roles often at games, sometimes he is on top of her, while at other times she is on top of him. Nancy K. Nanney describes "Lee's coming to terms with gender" as follows: "he grows but is never dominant or overpowering of others" (40).

What enabled Lee to represent such a liberal erotic union without the domination-submission relation in his poems? In *The Bonds of Love,* Jessica Benjamin demonstrates how the polarization of gender identity in Western culture produces subjugation in erotic relationships and how subjugation in the adult erotic life and culture/social system is derived from early psychic development of the infant in relation to

parents. According to Benjamin, in the Oedipal phase father is associated with the positive, while mother is associated with the negative, which leads to distinctions between the cultural femininity and masculinity. To break through the existing gender issues, Benjamin argues that we need to follow the psychic development based on "intersubjectivity," instead of the psychic development based on the Oedipus complex model and on "separation-individuation" theory. In light of comparison between the Oedipus complex and intersubjectivity, what will Lee's poems illuminate? In this paper, I consider characteristics of Lee's representation of identity and gender in light of Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity. I investigate the speaker's relationship with his father, with his mother, and with his lover in Lee's poems.

I Empathy or Separation?

—The Father-Son Relationship in Li-Young Lee

In the central psychoanalytic model of development, the Oedipus complex, the gender polarization embedded in culture can be traced from the Oedipal stage. Although recent psychoanalytic theories have traced the preliminary gender differentiation in preoedipal stage, in rapproachment, the significant phenomenon seen in both stages is identificatory love for the father.[1] The gender polarization shaped at the same time with identificatory love for the father is that the father emerges as the representative for the world as opposed to the primitive narcissistic oneness with the mother. The father emerges as the power to enable an infant to separate itself from the mother or the state of dependence.[2] The problematic effect of this internalized figure of father in culture is to produce "the split between a father of liberation and a mother of dependency" (Benjamin 132), "the contrast between a primitive/narcissistic mother and a civilized oedipal father" (141). That is why "the oedipal phase is marked by the boy's contempt for women" (162).

It leads to contemporary problematic critiques of "feminization" of

culture and to the pursuit of masculinity.[3] Michael Kimmel observes that contemporary masculinists in these few decades believed that "a secure and confident gender identity was possible through the fulfillment of Self-Made Masculinity" (203). Robert Bly who was "the most celebrated purveyors of the search for the deep masculine" in 1990s as well as Sam Keen, in his 1991 best-seller *Iron John,* presents "a tale of separation from mother, frightening risk, a heroic quest, the scarring wound, and the recovery of manly virtue presented in a format to enable men to reclaim their 'warrior' selves" (208).

The establishment of masculinity through separation from others, especially from femininity, is a typical theme of poems of a boy's initiation. Cyrus Cassells's "The Lesson (*from* Stoic Pose)," Robert Peters's "The Butchering" and Andrew Hudgins's "Seventeen" are good examples. In those poems, grown-up men deny a boy's love or empathy with others and the adult forces a boy to go through initiation to separate from empathy. Cassells's "The Lesson (*from* Stoic Pose)" and Peters's "The Butchering" describe the way adults require a boy to become indifferent to the pains of the slaughtered. In Hudgins's "Seventeen," the seventeen-year-old boy's empathy with the wounded dog is contrasted with the grown-up man's indifference to the dog and his contempt for the boy's empathy. In the boy's psychic development toward separation depicted in poems of initiation, love or empathy is opposed to masculine principles, that is, love or empathy is regarded as feminine principles. Such concepts seen in a boy's initiation coincide with "a unilinear trajectory that leads from oneness to separateness" in the separation-individuation theory (Benjamin 25). In the separation-individuation theory, which is a major achievement of the dominant American ego psychology derived from the Freudian psychology,[4] the psychic development of an infant is the rout through identificatory love for the father by which an infant can separate from the primitive oneness with the mother. We can see in poems of a boy's initiation such as Cassells's, Peters's and Hudgins's the movement from the maternal principle of oneness to the paternal principle of separation.

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Compared with the psychological model of separation-individuation theory, how does Lee describe a boy's development? I would like to consider "The Gift" (Lee, *Rose* 15–16) as Lee's poem of initiation by his father.

> To pull the metal splinter from my palm
> my father recited a story in a low voice.
> I watched his lovely face and not the blade.
> Before the story ended, he'd removed
> the iron sliver I thought I'd die from.
>
> I can't remember the tale,
> but hear his voice still, a well
> of dark water, a prayer.
> And I recall his hands,
> two measures of tenderness
> he laid against my face,
> the flames of discipline
> he raised above my head. (*Rose* 15)

Audrey Shafer's annotation of "The Gift" says, "Darker themes are alluded to—his father's hands were used not just to give love and protection, but also discipline." Shafer's annotation follows the binary opposition between love and discipline. In this binary opposition, as Shafer associates discipline with "[d]arker themes," discipline is regarded as oppressive action accompanied by threat. The concept of discipline as opposed to love, or more specifically empathetic feelings for others' pains, can be seen in some conventional poems about a boy's initiation. As we have seen in Cassells's "The Lesson (*from* Stoic Pose)," Peters's "The Butchering" and Hudgins's "Seventeen," a grown-up man or the adult's society tries to "discipline" a boy to abnegate his empathy with others. The "discipline" is a psychological torture to a boy. A boy often receives the discipline as oppression with a threat. In

this interpretation of a boy's discipline, Shafer is relevant when she associates "discipline" with "[d]arker themes" and when she draws a line between love and discipline which leads a boy to grow into adult. However, in Lee's "The Gift," are "the flames of discipline" (*Rose* 15) that Lee's father gave him separate from love?

It is true that some of Lee's metaphors such as "a well of dark water," "Little Assassin" and enigmatic lines such as *"Metal that will bury me," "Death visited here!"* resonate with "[d]arker themes." However, Lee violates conventional images of those words. In the second stanza, Lee connects "a well of dark water" with "a prayer"—an expression of love for others—and with the fact that "his [the father's] voice" is produced to reduce the child's pain. Despite the fact that "his [the father's] hands" hold the blade, they are primarily described as "two measures of tenderness" (*Rose* 15). And "his hands, two measures of tenderness" raised "the flames of discipline" (15). As in the third and fourth stanzas, the grown-up Lee "shave[s] her [his wife's] thumbnail down / so carefully she feels no pain" (15), what the child Lee learned through his father's "discipline" is deep consideration for an other, trying not to cause any pain to an other. As the child Lee thought "he's [the father's] given something to keep" (16), he "christen[s] it" not only "Little Assassin" but also "Ore Going Deep for My Heart" (16). In association with another poem "This Hour and What Is Dead" (*City* 35–36), Lee says, "His [the father's] love for me feels like fire, / feels like doves, feels like river-water" (36). Thus, it can be well inferred that his father's discipline is love; the intensity of that love feels like fire. The metaphors in "The Gift" for the father merge into intense love.

In Lee's autobiographical prose work *The Winged Seed,* his father is in the first place remembered as the embodiment of love. About the father's voice calling a member of his Christian congregation, Lee says, "Love was the meaning in this voice" (85). The metaphors in "The Gift" associated with love can be traced back to Lee's memory of the father:

The night is an indoor sea, he [Li-Young Lee's father] claimed.

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> Man is a seed, asleep unless the lightning kills him once. And then he may surrender, and enter the grape, where a ladder of dew drops him into wine, the wafer resolved into edible flesh. Ponder this jar of blood, child, don't cry.... Only the baker knows that bread is a form of our deepest human wish, a shape of love.... (*Winged* 136–37) .... Love is a massive compass and several gravity, numen manifest in what can be eaten. (137)

In light of the paragraph above, such lines as *"Metal that will bury me, /* christen it Little Assassin, / Ore Going Deep for My Heart" and *"Death visited here!"* can be interpreted as describing not a negative concept of death but the image of rebirth. As his father said, this metal, a metaphor for intense love, killed him once like "the lightning." And then he was reborn to love.

In Lee's representations of his father through his poems and prose, his father is the embodiment of love. As an instructor, Lee's father "disciplines" a boy Lee not to separate from love but to deepen love for an other. Following his father's instruction, the grown-up Lee comes to show empathy with an other, his wife Donna in "The Gift."

What we should not overlook in "The Gift" is that the grown-up Lee does for his wife Donna what his father used to do for the boy Lee. As Lee says "Had you followed that boy / you would have arrived here, / where I bend over my wife's right hand" (lines 18–20), Lee connects his father's discipline of love in his boyhood to his present relationship with his wife. While women are excluded from Bly's and Keen's advocated masculine identity and bonds, in Lee's "The Gift" the discipline of love the father transmitted to the son is now transmitted from the husband to the wife, a member of the opposite sex. In the Oedipal inheritance of discipline based on the father-son relationship, the grown-up Lee should transmit his received discipline to his son, or a boy in the next generation. By contrast, Lee's view of inheritance shows no generational nor sexual boundaries. Rather, Lee's intention in poems seems to connect the love between the father and the son to the heterosexual

love between the husband and the wife. In "Persimmons" (*Rose* 17-19), which focuses on memories of his father, his father's discipline of love associated with persimmons is revitalized in his present sexual relationship with his wife Donna. In "Persimmons," Lee's memories are not chronologically told. The temporally different scenes are intertwined, which indicates Lee's intention to fuse the parental love and the sexual.

In the psychic development of the Oedipus complex model, identificatory love for the father at the Oedipal stage results in gender polarization and a contempt for femininity. Whereas, Lee's view of the father did not ossify the conventional gender polarization, which fails to privilege the male bondage of the father-son relationship over the sexual relationship between a man and a woman. For Lee's identity as a male does not contradict "love" or "empathy" which is a feminine principle in Western culture; Lee does not seem to encounter the conflict between constructing a male identity and deepening love.

Lee's images of his father as the representative for love and empathy deviate from the Oedipal father who represents masculine authority. Lee's deviant images of the father as such lead Lee to deepen empathy with an other, rather than to separate from an other. Also, the images of the father apparently exempt Lee from an Oedipal conflict where the grown-up son defeats the aged father. In next section, I will consider the bankruptcy of the paternal authority and the changing images of the father in the son's mind, comparing Lee's "Persimmons" and "My Father, in Heaven, Is Reading Out Loud" (*City* 39-40) with Robert Bly's "My Father at 85."

II Liberation from the Oedipal Conflict

—Compared with Robert Bly's "My Father at 85"

Li-Young Lee "says his poetry is often a dialogue with his father. 'It's both a personal father and an impersonal father that I'm interested in. Somehow the two got married in my mind,' says Lee" (Miller 35). Also, in his interview with Matthew Fluharty, he talks about his

competition with his father, between his occupation as a poet and his father's as a minister. Fluharty asks, "In some respects, wasn't your father accomplishing that projection as a minister? He was leading people in prayer. Isn't the poem an act of prayer?" and Lee replies, "Yes, and maybe this is the old competition with the father and I'm not done with it" (Fluharty 99).

When Lee refers to "an impersonal father" or to "the old competition," he appears to be engaged in conflicts derived from the Oedipus complex. Despite great influence of his father and the authoritarian power of his father on some occasions, however, Lee's representation of his father does not seem to fit the model of the authoritarian father new masculinists seek. The Oedipus complex does not seem to operate in the father-son relationship in Lee's poems and prose.

It is true that Lee's father has a great authority in Lee's mind, but his father's authority resides not in masculinity but in love. That the dignity of the father resides in love results in a contrast between Lee's representation of the aging father in "Persimmons" (*Rose* 17-19) and that of Robert Bly in "My Father at 85." In Bly's poem, unlike in Lee's, the dignity of the father depends on whether the father can maintain a masculine authority.

Bly describes his new relationship with his aging father: "He is a small bird / waiting to be fed, / mostly beak, / an eagle or a vulture / or the Pharoah's servant / just before death. / My arm on the bedrail / rests there, / relaxed, with new love" (67). The factors that enabled his "new love" for the father are both positive and negative. If Bly is, as Kimmel regards him, one of "the most celebrated purveyors of the search for the deep masculine" (208), it can be inferred that Bly has been pursuing "the fulfillment of Self-Made Masculinity" (203) which is derived from the Oedipus complex; following the psychoanalytic model of the Oedipus complex, the former figure of his father must have been associated with the culturally embedded patriarchal figure of father. Whether or not Bly used to be satisfied with his father's figure, the former father-son relation must have been considered in the line of

availability of his father as the model of the authoritarian father, with which he wished to identify. If Bly used to love his father, it means the success of "identificatory love" for the idealized masculine father through his father; if Bly used to be ashamed of his father, it means that his father was not qualified for Bly's idealized masculinity. As we see in lines 26–29: "I do not want / or need / to be shamed by him / any longer," it is inferred that Bly used to suffer the conflict over the difference between the ideal image of the father and his real father.

Because of his physical weakness, Bly's aging father is disqualified from serving as the child's idealized masculine figure. His father's dependence on others does not fill the bills of the representative for "Self-Made Masculinity." The dismissal of his father from the conflict within Bly's identificatory love based on the Oedipus complex leads to the present new relationship with his father. Instead of comparing his father to the masculine ideal, Bly recognizes the father as a new person and constructs the more personal bond with the father, based on "new love." On the other hand, this new relationship includes the reversal of power between a parent as a caregiver and a child as a care recipient in the backgrounds. Bly describes his aging father as if he was a baby: "a small bird / waiting to be fed." The father is now powerless and dependent, and their politic is reversed. Ironically, Bly can be "relaxed" because he won the competition with his father in regard to domination-submission. Whether old or new, Bly's father-son relationship maintains the Oedipal premise that dependence disempowers a man and, conversely, independence empowers a man.

By contrast, in Lee's "Persimmons," the father's physical weakness and dependence on others does not decrease the father's former dignity. In the last stanza, the aging and blind father still teaches the son a lesson of love as the profound truth of life: *"Some things never leave a person: / scent of the hair of one you love, / the texture of persimmons, / in your palm, the ripe weight"* (*Rose* 19, Lee's italics). The grown-up son Lee learns the crucial lesson from the physically weaker father, which does not display the Oedipal structure as seen in Bly: the physical weakness

=the decrease of masculinity=the reversal of power between father and son.

The father's words in the last stanza ring as the keynote of the entire poem. In "Persimmons," Lee's consciousness moves freely from his boyhood memories of persimmons to his memories of persimmons in his youth to the present scene of making love with his wife. As Lee says in the ninth stanza, "I rummage, looking / for something I lost" (*Rose* 18) , he is rummaging through his present and past recalled in the poem, looking for something he lost; in the end he attains to his father's words in the last stanza. Lee's father, who once replied to Lee *"All gone"* about his sight, now says, *"Some things never leave a person."* We could imagine how deeply and heavily the father's words strike the son's heart. Now Lee feels, tastes, *"the ripe weight"* of his father's words which are ripen in his heart over years.

Although both Lee and Bly entertain love for their aging fathers, their views of the aging father are fundamentally different: Lee's father as his master of love and Bly's father as his cared baby. Bly's present "new love" for his aging father is based on his liberation from the internal conflicts and repression embedded in the Oedipus complex. Bly's new love for his father is, as it were, a by-product of the Oedipus complex. On the other hand, Lee's relationship with his father is constantly based on love through his boyhood to his youth to the present.

However, it is too early to conclude that Lee's love for his father is not a continuation of identificatory love for father at the Oedipal stage and that Lee's love is not a by-product of the breakdown of the Oedipal conflict as seen in Bly. Before the conclusion, we need to ask a question: whether Lee's figure of the father is shown as an idealized, impersonal one which actually contradicts his real-life father. As Lee refers to "both a personal father and an impersonal father" (Fluharty 99), his father represents not only the personal father but also the impersonal one in his mind, which would recall up the Oedipal identificatory love for the authoritarian father. Then, the core questions in comparison with the Oedipal model of the father-son relationship are whether Lee's

relation with the father produces the conflict between the two figures as in Bly and whether Lee's impersonal father propels a child to separate from parents. "My Father, in Heaven, Is Reading Out Loud" produces the contrast between the impersonal father and the personal father.

In "My Father," the majestic, superhuman figure of Lee's father is contrasted with the scholarly figure, "one of the powerless, / to whom knowledge came while he sat among / suitcases, boxes, old newspapers, string" (*City* 40) and Lee feels close to this powerless, indecisive father, in that, he says, "he was one like me" (40). Does this contrast mean that the authoritarian model of the father of the Oedipal period collapsed and turned into the real figure of his father as a person? Is Lee's intimacy with the more powerless father a by-product of the breakdown of the Oedipal conflict as seen in Bly? Here, we should pay close attention to two aspects of the poem: first, in terms of time sequence, Lee's representation of the impersonal and the personal fathers does not show unilinear movement from the superhuman father into the personal, powerless one. On the contrary, the superhuman, "impersonal" father is described in the present tense, while the powerless "personal" father is described in the past tense. Second, the "impersonal" figure of the father does not necessarily mean contradict the real-life father.

It is true that Lee feels less intimacy with the superhuman father. This impersonal figure, however, can be traced back to Lee's memory of some of his father's characteristics. In *The Winged Seed,* the father is described as the benevolent minister pouring love to every member of his church. The father's love might have been philanthropic rather than personal. It might well have been difficult for Lee to gain a personal bond with the father, from this philanthropic love. The impersonal nature of the powerful father found in Lee's poems would not contradict the actual father. If both characteristics of "the personal father" and characteristics of "the impersonal father" are based on Lee's real-life father, those two figures of father do not necessarily contradict each other. As Lee says "the two got married" (Miller 35), the two

figures of father are fused into the whole picture of the father in Lee's mind.

Besides, Lee's concept of true identity as "universe or God" (Marshall 134) and his notion of a continuum of identity between generations provide another perspective on the superhuman father. Lee says, "It's an exercise of the mind to think constantly that this false identity is fading away and my true self or identity is universe or God" (Marshall 134). Lee sees "all of Taoism and Judeo-Christian religion" behind his father (Fluharty 99). Traditions of Chinese philosophies and basically of the Eastern thoughts have regarded the true identity as "the absolute One, the ultimate reality which can not be segmented" (Izutsu 301, my translation). The traditions seek abnegating the individual ego and channeling oneself into the ultimate "One." All spirits, alive or dead, are under the process of becoming "the cosmic identity" (Izutsu 342, my translation)=God; the ancestral spirits are further advanced in the process than the alive. Lee appears to share such Eastern traditions, probably affected by his parents' Chinese tradition. We can clearly see Lee's concept similar to the Eastern concept, when Lee articulates that "I believe poetry's work is to uncover a genuine or authentic human identity, an identity even prior to childhood" (Fluharty 83, my emphasis).

Lee puts forth, then, a notion of a continuum of identity between and among generations. Lee explains a benefit of telling his children stories, "I think it helps them somehow, gives them a feeling of an infinite background, that their background doesn't end at the hospital they were born in. It helps them to look back at their father's past and see an infinite horizon" (Fluharty 95, my emphasis). "An infinite horizon" metaphorizes the successive births of generations and God as the origin to which their births can be traced. Partly because his father is now dead, Lee sees him as more powerful in the line of infinite generations of ancestors traced back to God. Both in separation-individuation theory and in classic Freudian psychoanalysis, separation from parents and a sense of independence are regarded as empowering. By contrast,

in Lee's concept of "a genuine human identity prior to childhood," deepening the bond with parents empowers a person, because it enables the person to become closer to the true identity, "universe or God." Separation from parents means the loss of access to the source of infinite power.

Therefore, what Lee is attempting to do by representing "My father, in Heaven" is to construct and feel the deeper bond with the father, now a part of universe. In the interview with Fluharty about twenty years after his father's death,[5] Lee emphasizes his increasing connection to his father: "[w]hen he [the father] died he took part of me with him, and part of me lives there among the dead" (98). Rather than collecting the memories of his father in the past, Lee is writing about the present, vivid interaction with his dead (but living closer to him) father. Lee mentions the dynamics of his changing relationship with his father and an increase in his understanding of the father (Fluharty 98-99).

In the second stanza of "My Father," Lee describes his father's active influence on his life: "Because my father walked the earth with a grave, / determined rhythm, my shoulders ached / from his gaze. Because my father's shoulders / ached from the pulling of oars, my life now moves / with a powerful back-and-forth rhythm: / nostalgia, speculation" (*City* 39). Here, the influence takes place in not only the temporally same actions, but also in the temporally different actions in the past and present. In Lee's interviews, he insists that "everything is vibrations" (Fluharty 93). He also says, "I happen to think that thoughts are like radio waves" (Marshall 147). I would emphasize that Lee's view of vibrations means primarily interactions among everything in the universe and that significantly the interactions include those between the visible and the invisible, which is "more real" in Lee's mind (Marshall 140). Nanney interprets the lines from the second stanza of "My Father" as follows: "This unstable motion of the mind makes it difficult for the persona to keep in touch with the present" (34). However, it seems to me that vibration in Lee's mind is cross-spatial and cross-temporal interactions and that those interactions are

occurring in the present act of writing a poem. Lee says, "Words are vibrations. The poem is a field of words, a field of vibrations" (Fluharty 93). Thus, in the poem—the present field of vibrations—every element whether past or present, earth or heaven, visible or invisible, intersects through their vibrations. Lee talks about the active presence of his father: "There is something charged about his presence in my life, so that every time I emotionally encounter him this consciousness becomes present" (Fluharty 84).

As Lee explains the concept of vibrations as opposed to the appearance of solidity of an object, the core notion of his view of the universe becomes clear as interactions and connections as opposed to concrete separateness or individuation. In this respect, Lee's view of the world and of the relationship with an other can be distinguished from the way of thinking fostered by the separation-individuation psychoanalytic model of human development. However, it does not lead to the opportunistic conclusion that Lee's poetic world is constituted only by ideal intersubjective relationships. If the achievement of an ideal intersubjective relationship is expected to prevent gender differentiation, Lee's disparity between the representation of father and that of mother would lead the reader to question Lee's gender polarization in paternal and maternal roles. The representation of the maternal figure is often accompanied by the presence of the father, as in "Braiding" (*Rose* 57–58), "Early in the Morning" (*Rose* 25), or "Rainy Diary"[6] (*Rose* 59–62). Lee rarely focuses on the mother-son relationship. Does Lee see the mother only as the father's wife? Does not Lee recognize maternal subjectivity? In section three I will consider the maternal figure in Lee's poems.

III Maternal Sexual Subjectivity

The gist of Benjamin's argument is that to achieve an ideal relationship with others, especially with a member of the other gender, we should have recognized maternal subjectivity, particularly the maternal

sexual agency through our early psychic development. Benjamin critiques "the polarization of gender identity": "Male and female each adopt one side of an interlocking whole. This one-sided character of differentiation evolves in response to the mother's lack of subjectivity, with which the girl identifies and the boy disidentifies" (85); "the consequences of the traditional sexual complementarity: man expresses desire and woman is the object of it" (86).

Therefore, the questions we should examine in Lee's poems are, first, whether the poems represent maternal sexual subjectivity, and second, whether Lee identifies or disidentifies with the mother.

Let us examine "The Waiting" (*City* 61–64), the important poem which portrays the relationship of the (typically Oedipal) triad: father, mother and son. "The Waiting" would be the most significant and shocking poem to the reader if, in fact, maternal sexual agency is such "a disturbing possibility that even psychoanalysis seldom contemplates" it (Benjamin 89). In the poem, "after hours / of rocking the child, an infant then," they "began to make love" beside the sleeping infant. "[T]he boy / wakened crying" and "the woman [the mother], naked, rose / to bring the baby to their bed, and, lying / with her back to the man, / suckled the boy while / the man lay longing, hard yet, thighs wet / from her, and on his chest / her odor" (*City* 62–63). The following stanza is crucial in terms of maternal sexuality and of the difference from the Oedipal triangular relationship among father, mother and son:

> By murmurs and thingless words
> the mother answers
> her son's sucking, his
> gulping and mewling.
> Rolling towards them, the man
> reaches around her waist to stroke the boy's head.
> Slowly, she reaches behind
> and claps him, fastens

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him to her, while he
half mounts her damp length,
and spills his semen between her knees.
Exhausted, the three
bodies, complicated
thus, sleep a few hours,
until one rises
for work, in light
the color of breast milk drained on the sheet. (*City* 63)

I would emphasize three significant aspects in the stanza above. First, in the poem, the mother demonstrates her sexual agency, as "[s]lowly, she reaches behind / and claps him, fastens / him to her[.]" She does not passively accept her husband's desire, rather, shows her own desire. Second, the maternal sexual subjectivity as well as the paternal sexuality is observed by the infant boy. Third, very importantly and maybe disturbingly, the mother's lovemaking with the father is done as she suckles her infant boy. It would be very clear how drastically those aspects contradict the traditional maternal figure from the Freudian notion of the femininity: "Though the image of woman is associated with motherhood and fertility, the mother is not articulated as a sexual subject, one who actively desires something for herself—quite the contrary. The mother is a profoundly desexulized figure" (Benjamin 88). Benjamin goes on to say,

> Woman is to accept the abrogation of her own will, to surrender the autonomy of her body in childbirth and lactation, to live for another. Her own sexual feelings, with their incipient threat of selfishness, passion, and uncontrollability, are a disturbing possibility that even psychoanalysis seldom contemplates. (89)

Also, it should be noted that an important event of the Oedipus complex is when the boy recognizes that he must renounce his desire for his

mother out of fear for his father. In the Oedipal period, the boy recognizes that he must be excluded from the parents' sexual activity. On the other hand, in the poem, the infant boy is not excluded from his parents' lovemaking.

You might wonder if the psychoanalytical interpretation of this night's scene is that the infant son is permitted to do what the Oedipal father does for the mother. That is to say, the son might enjoy sharing the mother's body as an object, together with the father. I would rebut this interpretation of seeing the mother as an object and of excluding her from the male homoerotic bond, by emphasizing the fact that the mother exercises sexual agency. Moreover, I focus on the last six lines of the stanza: "Exhausted, the three / bodies, complicated / thus, sleep a few hours, / until one rises / for work..." As they are described as "the three bodies," all of them are equal participants of that night's lovemaking. Renunciations of hierarchy in age and of gender differentiation are underscored by the word "one." All three are called by the ungendered, equal pronoun "one." Although the situation suggests that the "one" who "rises / for work" probably be the father, we should note that Lee uses the ambiguous "one" instead of "the father." Lee's choice of the word emphasizes the equal relationship of the three. The infant boy shares the act of making love as "one" of the participants. I do not think that the infant boy shares the mother's body with the father as man to man by the medium of the woman's body. In Lee's representation of the night, the three bodies are engaged in the same activity of making love.

It is unclear to what extent the picture of the three's making love in the poem recalls an actual event. The picture of that special night could be Lee's dream vision. However, even if this is a "dream," the importance is that in Lee's representation of the father-mother-son relationship, the son does not want to supercede the father's place as the lover of the mother and the father does not exclude the son from his sexual love with the mother. The infant boy's sharing the night's experience is not "taboo" but even encouraged by the father, the model of which is probably Lee. Lee cherishes this memory, and "hope[s]" that the infant

boy remembered this night's experience, "I don't remember if he lay there remembering—/ I hope he did..." (*City* 62).

Lee, his wife and his son appear to be the models for the father, the mother and the son in "The Waiting." Although less drastical than the representation in "The Waiting," the allusions to his parents' sex life are dispersed throughout Lee's poems. In "Rainy Diary," the mother is observed to be sleeping with "the rain," a metaphor for the dead father. In the poems about the mother's hair, such as, "Braiding" (*Rose* 57-58), "Dreaming of Hair" (*Rose* 22-24), or "Early in the Morning" (*Rose* 25), the mother's hair is always associated with the father's caressing behavior of combing. Also, the following lines about his father's hand: "My father's hand / cutting my chin, weighing / tenderness between us, / pressing my mother's hip, weighing desire, / and cleaving a book open" ("Furious Versions," *City* 22) lead to indicate that the mother's hip not only stimulates the father's desire but also displays her own sexual desire and that as his father's hand serves both as "weighing / tenderness between [father and son]" and as "weighing [mother's] desire," the boundaries between parental love and marital, sexual love collapse in Lee.

In the end of this section, I should refer to the second question of whether Lee identifies or disidentifies with his mother. A temporary answer is that although not many, some poems include Lee's articulations of his identification with his mother. In "Always a Rose" (*Rose* 37-45), Lee is conscious of physical inheritance from his mother: "My arms and legs are the rain in its opulence, / my face my mother's face. / My hair is also hers" (39). In the poem, interestingly, Lee implies his cross-gendered identity at his birth: "Vestige, omen, this is the stain / which at my birth my father / traced with his finger / while pronouncing in dread / that I was born half girl" (39). Here, although his father pronounced Lee's girl-like features "in dread," it did not turn Lee toward shame about his feminine features or into the masculinist's misogyny which is caused by the phobia of being labeled "sissy." He represents his voice as "my voice / of little girl, of man, of blood" (43).

Another complicated question awaits further investigation. If "the mother's immeshment in...culture" is based on that "mothers are the primary source for children's language acquisition" as Suzanne Juhasz argues (116), what can we make of the fact that Lee writes his poems in English, the use of which was prohibited at home by his parents? Lee states that "[his] mother would not answer [him] unless [he] answered her in Chinese" (Fluharty 96). In light of Lee's complicated linguistic situations, does writing a poem in English mean separateness from his mother, or further identification with her? In section four, I will consider Lee's writing a poem in English, and the function of the "foreignness" of English, and then connect those matters to his relationship with his mother.

IV Intersubjective Space in Li-Young Lee's Poetry

Benjamin emphasizes the importance of maintaining the "tension between assertion of self and recognition of other" (49), to accomplish mutual recognition. According to Benjamin, "[o]ne of the most important insights of intersubjective theory is that sameness and difference exist simultaneously in mutual recognition" (47). Then, the necessary premise is "[t]he discovery of the object as a real, external being" (42). Maternal subjectivity is important because the failure of a mother's being "an other" to an infant impedes mutual recognition. As far as I can tell, Lee seems to devote many more of his pages to the theme of sameness. Does Lee maintain difference between himself and an other, as well as sameness? If it is not the case, does it mean that Lee's poetry fails to recognize an other, finding only sameness? Even in interviews, Lee talks more about sameness. For example, about the father's voice in his poems, he says, "Anymore I have given up distinguishing between my voice and my father's. The question for me is: When I say 'me,' what do I mean by 'me'? Am I my mother, my father, my brother, my friends, my wife, my children, am I what I watched on TV?..." (Fluharty 84).

Those comments might lead to misunderstanding of Lee's poetic activity as the resolution into oneness. However, for Lee, separateness between persons, in Lee's words something "foreign," is the premise which goes without saying. Lee talks about not only love/understanding but also "the tension" between him and his father (Fluharty 99). Indeed, as he referred to "the tension" between him and his father, he often sees a tension between things. As he describes his relationship with his father as "the tension," he also describes his position between Eastern religion and Christianity as "a tension." When the interviewer asks, "Are you working as a poet toward a resolution, or to further define the tension between the two," Lee replies, "I am trying to live right at the seam and not go crazy. That's what I am" (99).

As far as we read Lee's poems of love, we might mistakenly believe that Lee represents bonds between lovers only as oneness. It is true that Lee represents the moment of feeling sameness through love, but we are likely to overlook that Lee includes the perception of foreignness as the basic condition preceding union by love. In his comments on writing a poem in a "foreign" language, English, he also describes the lover's body as "foreign."

> **Interviwer:** How do you think that affects your poetry—if you are writing in a language that is foreign to you?
> **Lee:** It feels great. It feels the same way as when you touch the body or face of a lover. It's foreign. So it's the same thing when I am using the language. I feel like I am touching the body of someone I love very much. The English language is like a lover, and the poem is like a body. (Fluharty 97)

Lee's comments above provide a clue to the question of why Lee's poems represent primarily the state of sameness despite his recognition of foreignness. When Lee sees an object or recalls memories of people to write a poem, those objects may be recognized as an other, foreign to him. Then, when Lee puts them into a poem in English, the figures

which take new shapes in English become lovers to communicate with him. As he describes the language, English, and the activity of writing a poem in metaphorical terms of erotic union, for Lee, writing about some figures in English poems must be felt as on-going erotic unions. Lee articulates his unique notion of vibration of words repeatedly: "Because words have vibrations to me. I don't experience sentences as a string of words. I can't explain to you how concrete this is for me" (Marshall 141).

Lee also says that "Words are vibrations. The poem is a field of words, a field of vibrations" (Fluharty 93). For Lee, a poem is "a field" where he can commune with an other through vibrations of words. I argue that the foreignness/otherness of English and Lee's feeling of erotic unions brought by English are the metaphors for Lee's view of "an other." As we have seen in "The Waiting," the woman—wife and mother—in Lee's poems exposes her sexual subjectivity, and her husband and son recognize her sexual subjectivity. Lee represents the woman or the mother not as an object which the subject (man) subordinates, but a true other, another subject. To construct togetherness with the woman or the mother as an other, not as a subordinate object, is similar to feeling erotic unions with the foreign English through writing English poems.

I have so far investigated characteristics of Lee's poems, in light of the Oedipus complex and of intersubjective theory. This paper can not give a decisive answer to whether Lee suffered the Oedipus complex and overcame it in his way. However, it can be fairly said that the intersubjective concept of the maintenance of tension is more suitably applied to Lee's poems.

As Benjamin observes, "[t]he conflict between assertion of self and need for the other was articulated long before modern psychology began to explore the development of self" (31). For instance, Hegel "showed how the self's wish for absolute independence clashes with the self's need for recognition" (32). And for Hegel, "the tension between

asserting the self and recognizing the other, *must* break down" (32), since "the subject cannot accept his dependency on someone he cannot control, the solution is to subjugate and enslave the other" (54). For Freud and Hegel the breakdown of tension and domination as its result are "what happens in the 'state of nature'" (54).

In fact, the difficulty is seen in the fact that Benjamin analyses many cases caused by the breakdown of tension, in her book advocating the necessity of mutual recognition. However, those who seek the equal relationship with an other based on mutual recognition do not see the maintenance of tension impossible, rather they are inevitably led to keeping efforts to the maintenance of tension. Indeed, a poet Li-Young Lee, who is not a theorist of intersuvjectivity, seeks a way to maintain the "tension" instead of finding "resolution." His search as such appears to produce poems of the man-woman relationship liberated from the domination-submission, such as "Persimmons" and "The Waiting."

The intersubjective view of subject enables the coexistence of sameness and difference. This view coincides with Lee's ideas of "the consciousness of all things simultaneously" (Fluharty 84) and of "manifold in being" (83). Lee says, "Poetry accounts for the many-ness of who we are" (83).

Li-Young Lee's poetic activity tends toward the practice of intersubjectivity. The practice is seen in Lee's representation of his erotic life with his wife as being liberated from the domination-submission. An experience of reading Lee's poems as the field practicing intersubjectivity would lead us to search a possibility of avoiding the domination-submission relationship with an other, the problem caused by the psychic development of the Oedipus complex model.

Notes

* This paper is based on and developed from my oral presentation on Dec. 8, 2001 at Rikkyo-Eibei-Bungakukai (the 2001 academic conference for the English Department at Rikkyo University) titled "Reading Li-Young Lee's Poetry – gender, identity, intersubjectivity" (「Li-Young Lee の詩を読む –

gender, identity, intersubjectivity」). I should also note that some arguments on Lee's father-son relationship in sections one and two here are based on and developed from my Japanese essay "Empathy or Separation?: The Father-Son Relationship in Li-Young Lee" (「共感か分離か－Li-Young Lee における父子関係」) in *The Rikkyo Review: Arts & Letters,* Number 64 (2004), pp. 25–41.

1 See Benjamin 100–14, 132, 144, 146, 153*n.*, 272*n.*
2 Although "psychoanalysis currently sees the oedipal conflict as the culmination of the preoedipal struggle to separate from parents" (Benjamin 140), "[w]hether the Oedipus complex is interpreted as a theory of separation or of the superego, it still contains the equation of paternity with individuation and civilization" (140).
3 For example, "[t]he social critique, best articulated by Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism,*" argues that the Oedipus complex "was the fundament for the autonomous, rational individual, and today's unstable families with their less authoritarian fathers no longer foster the Oedipus complex" (Benjamin 137).
4 Benjamin 17–18.
5 The interview was conducted by Matthew Fluharty in the fall of 1998, at Union Station in Chicago and by telephone. Li-Young Lee's father died in 1980.
6 In the poem, the mother is not seen with the actual father. However, she is seen to be sleeping with "the rain," which is the metaphor for the father.

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